

Organizational Culture and Retention in Public Child Welfare Services Organizations

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Statement of the Research Problem

Extremely high turnover rates have plagued Public Child Welfare Services organizations historically and continue to do so currently. Turnover rates have ranged from 30-60% annually (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001) and from 46% to as high as 90% in a two-year period (Drake & Yadama, 1996). The most current national data reveals turnover rates between 15%-22% among case managers and social workers in Public Child Welfare Services (PCWS) agencies (American Public Human Services Association, 2005). The rates vary by task classification with the turnover rates among “child protective service workers” listed as the highest at 22.1%. This represents an increase in turnover rates from year 2000 data that yielded a rate of 19.9% (APHSA, 2005).

Turnover is costly for PCWS organizations and has adverse effects on the work experience and morale of the social workers and case managers who remain in PCWS agencies as large numbers of their peers depart. They must cover the caseloads of those who leave and assist in the training and mentoring of new employees. The greatest costs of the high turnover rates in Public CWS, though, are experienced by the children and families served by CWS agencies. These costs are inestimable since they are endured by vulnerable children and families who often must live with the decisions of a series of social workers whose training, years of experience and varying levels of competence may be suspect. Children who may already have difficulties concerning trust and attachment are forced to form relationships with new social workers who will make decisions that will affect them for the rest of their lives (Bednar, 2003). Trust and attachment can become such pervasive issues for these children that a child in one study who had been assigned a tenth social worker chose to forego learning the worker’s name, simply referring to the worker as “Number Ten” (Flower, McDonald, and Sumski, 2005).

The longstanding nature of turnover in PCWS organizations has resulted in many empirical explorations of the problem over the past few decades (Mor Barak, et al., 2001). Retention, however, has received less attention in the research literature. Since retention directly

counteracts the problem of turnover and results in what is generally considered a favorable outcome, retention was a primary focus of this inquiry.

Another principal emphasis in the study was the impact of organizational dynamics on retention in Public Child Welfare Services organizations. The research represented here relies on Glisson's (2000, 2002) previous conceptual and empirical work concerning organizational dynamics and Landsman's (2000, 2001) research on work attitudes and retention.

Research Background and Hypotheses

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of organizational culture on the experiences of social workers and case managers in Public Child Welfare Services organizations. Since organizational culture may have an effect on the retention of social workers and case managers in PCWS organizations, the goal of the study was to investigate the relationship between organizational culture and retention in Public Child Welfare Services organizations in Central California.

According to Cooke and Rousseau (1988), and Glisson (2002), there are at least two types of organizational culture; constructive and defensive. Following these researchers, organizational culture was viewed as either constructive or defensive in this study and it was hypothesized that the cultures in PCWS organizations would vary between these two cultural types.

Other constructs included in the study were service quality, work attitudes and organizational climate. Work attitudes characterize a group of variables that indicate the perceptions social workers and case managers have about their PCWS agencies and the roles they play as employees in those agencies. They also serve as indicators of the "fit" social workers and case managers experience between themselves and their agencies and the field in which they offer services. Work attitudes variables include; job satisfaction, commitment to the agency, service orientation and commitment to the field of Child Welfare Services. Work attitudes and service quality were included in the study to determine if they had any effect on the hypothesized relationships between organizational culture and retention.

The research questions addressed in the study focused primarily on organizational culture and retention. The research questions were as follows:

1.) Does organizational culture affect the retention of social workers and case managers in PCWS organizations in Central California?

A.) How do constructive cultures affect retention?

B.) How do defensive cultures affect retention?

2.) How does organizational culture combine with work attitudes to affect retention among PCWS social workers/case managers in Central California?

3.) Does organizational culture affect service quality in PCWS agencies in Central California?

A.) Does organizational culture combine with service quality to affect retention in PCWS agencies in Central California?

The intent to stay was utilized as the key indicator of retention throughout the study. Retention was differentiated as retention in the organization (in which the participant was employed when data was collected) and retention in the field of Child Welfare Services. Therefore, the retention focused aspects of the study included both categories: the intent to stay in the current employing PCWS organization and the intent to stay in the field of Child Welfare Services.

The hypotheses that guided the current study followed the research questions listed above.

Hypothesis 1: Constructive organizational culture has a positive relationship with the intent to stay in the organization and in the field of CWS among social workers and case managers in PCWS organizations in Central California.

Hypothesis 2: Defensive organizational culture has a negative relationship with the intent to stay in the organization and in the field of CWS among social workers and case managers in PCWS organizations in Central California.

Additional hypotheses included projected moderation of the relationships between either constructive organizational culture or defensive organizational culture with intent to stay in PCWS organizations or in the field of CWS by the work attitudes variables or service quality. These hypotheses connected directly to research questions 2-3.

Though there were not formal hypotheses constructed concerning this an additional exploratory focus of the study was the affect organizational climate has on retention in PCWS organizations. Organizational climates can be conceptualized as engaging or stressful in nature. Engagement includes elements such as personalization and personal accomplishment while stress is composed of emotional exhaustion, role conflict and role overload.

Methodology

A cross-sectional survey research design was used to address the research questions concerning the relationship between organizational culture and the retention of Public Child Welfare Services social workers and case managers. In addition, this design promoted the exploration of related research questions concerning the potential moderating effects of work

attitudes, and service quality with the relationship between organizational culture and retention. Control variables included age, race, highest educational degree earned, type of highest degree (social work degree, others), title in agency, years in the agency and years in the field.

Convenience sampling was used as the sampling method in this study. Study participants were recruited from Public Child Welfare Services agencies in 11-counties in Central California. The researcher traveled 4101-miles to administer surveys to PCWS personnel on 31-data collection trips.

In order to test the influence of the organizational dynamics of the agency on retention, standard analysis (simple aggregation of data) presents prohibitive limitations. Therefore a multilevel modeling approach was utilized to find an optimal fit with the nature of the data and the research questions posed in the study. This was necessary since each participant worked within a program which was situated within an agency. Group level data (represented by program affiliation within agencies) was used to represent organizational dynamics.

First however, the referent shift consensus model was used to test those constructs that were conceptualized as group level variables as opposed to individual level variables (Glisson & James, 2002; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000). The group level variables were organizational culture (constructive and passive defensive), service quality and organizational climate. All of the variables met the criteria to be considered group level variables (using a combination of the r_{wg} , type 1 intraclass correlation and eta-squared statistical tests) except for passive defensive organizational culture (Glisson & James, 2002). Therefore, passive defensive organizational culture was not used in subsequent multivariate analyses.

Multilevel modeling was used to analyze the data to test for both individual level relationships and cross-level (group level and individual level) interactions. The Hierarchical Linear Modeling 6 software program was used for this purpose (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2005). Various two-level models were used to estimate the relationships between constructive organizational culture, organizational climate and service quality on level two with the outcome variables on level one: intention to stay in the agency and intention to stay in the field-CWS. These analyses estimated the effects of the constructive culture, climate and service quality shared in agency programs by the groups in this study on individual employee's intentions to remain either in the agency or in the field of CWS. Additional analyses included estimations of the relationships between the work attitude variables and the outcome variables on level one and finally the effects of the level two variables on these relationships.

Results

Data collection resulted in a sample size of $n=767$ subjects. These individuals worked in programs in 34-groups within 11-county PCWS agencies. The response rate in this study was 69%. By position or title in the agency, social workers and case managers comprised 77% of the sample in this study, supervisors made up 17% of the sample and 6% were from mixed positions.

All participants provided direct services to clients or worked with those who do (i.e., trainers, etc.) in other than administrative or clerical capacities in the agencies.

Bivariate analysis revealed significant correlations ($p \leq .01$ level) between all of the variables used in the study. In addition, the directionality produced in the correlational analysis resulted in the expected directions for all correlations.

HLM was used to accomplish multivariate data analysis by implementing several one level and multilevel models to test for various relationships between the variables in the study. Surprisingly, the results of these models revealed that none of the hypothesized relationships were significant. Virtually, none of the analyses that used organizational culture as a predictor or as a moderating variable yielded significant results. Service quality resulted in significant multicollinearity with organizational culture and, as might be expected, also yielded no significant predictive or moderating effects in the data analytic models used in the study. Therefore, none of the hypotheses in the study were supported. However, analyses with the work attitudes variables resulted in significant predictive relationships with some of the work attitudes variables predicting retention. In addition, subsequent exploratory analyses revealed that organizational climate had a significant moderating effect on several of the relationships between work attitudes variables and the retention of employees in PCWS organizations.

The following is a further explication of the findings. Several of the multilevel models resulted in significant findings concerning both individual level and group level variables. This was particularly true of “random coefficients” models that were used to test relationships among level one or individual level variables and “intercepts and slopes as outcomes” models that were used to test potential moderating effects by level two or group level variables on level one relationships. In the tables provided below, relevant significant slopes coefficients are summarized in order to gather and report the information from several models simultaneously. Intercepts are also reported though in these results none of the intercepts were significantly greater than zero due to the use of grand mean centering. Variance components are not listed since, in general, they were not as informative in this study as the slopes coefficients were.

On the individual level, the results of analyses with random coefficients models yielded the following significant findings: the models that utilized intent to stay in the agency as the criterion resulted in significant predictive relationships with three variables. In order of strength, the significant predictors were organizational commitment (agency), job satisfaction, and commitment to the field of CWS. Analyses with intent to stay in the field-CWS as the outcome variable resulted in significant predictive effects by commitment to the field and job satisfaction. The results are presented in Table 1 with the coefficients listed for each slope denoting the strength of the predictive relationships.

Table 1 *Significant Level One Results*

Outcome Variables	Predictors		
	Commitment Agency	Job Satisfaction	Commitment Field
Intent-Agency	.40	.36	.14
Intent-CWS	-	.23	.52

Analyses utilizing intercepts and slopes as outcomes models resulted in significant moderation by one second level construct, organizational climate, of individual level relationships. First, organizational climate moderated the relationship between job satisfaction and intent to stay in the agency in two models. In addition, when intent to stay in the field-CWS was the criterion, organizational climate moderated the predictive effect of job satisfaction in two models. The significant findings concerning the moderation of level one relationships by organizational climate are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 *Significant Level Two Results-A*

Outcome Variables	Moderating Effects of Organizational Climate	
	Intercept	Predictor Job Satisfaction
Intent-Agency Model-1	.01	-.174
Model-2	.001	-.177
Intent-CWS Model-1	-.040	-.083
Model-2	-.033	-.082

Organizational climate was also examined in two dimensions, engagement and stress. Significant results emerged from analyses that included them differentially. Table 3 contains the significant results that emerged from those models.

Table 3 *Significant Level Two Results-B*

Outcome Variables	Moderating Effects Engagement OC		Moderating Effects Stress OC	
	Intercept	Job Satisfaction	Intercept	Job Satisfaction
Intent-Agency	-.001	.105	-.027	-.109
Intent-CWS	Intercept	Commit-CWS	Intercept	Commit-CWS
	.001	.045	-.013	-.077

Engagement moderated the prediction of intent to stay in the agency by job satisfaction. The main effect of commitment to stay in CWS on intent to stay in the field of CWS was also significantly moderated by engaging organizational climate. Stressful climate moderated the effect of job satisfaction on intent to stay in the agency and the prediction of intent to stay in the field-CWS by commitment to the field.

It is clear from these findings that stress had the greatest moderating effects of the two types of organizational climate. However, engagement is also an influential contextual element in PCWS organizations. The predictive effects of job satisfaction and commitment to the field of CWS operated as a function of both types of organizational climate on retention in this sample.

An illustration of the results of one model included in Table 3 may help elucidate the relationships between these variables and serve as an example of similar findings from other models in the study. The relationship depicted in Figure 1 is the moderating influence of stressful organizational climate (in 34 groups) on the relationship between job satisfaction as the predictor and intent to stay in the agency as the outcome with an intercept of -.027 and a slope of -.109.



Figure 1 Moderation by Stress: Job Satisfaction and Intent-Agency

Job satisfaction was grand mean centered and stressful organizational climate was standardized in this model. The intercepts were not significant and had a value of approximately zero (where the lines cross). The slopes were significant ($p < .05$). The colored lines represent the averaged upper (red) and lower (blue) quartiles of stress. Therefore, the red line represents higher stress and the blue line represents lower stress. Figure 1 illustrates that when the organizational climate was perceived as more stressful, the relationship between job satisfaction and intent to stay in the agency was weaker. However, among those groups in which the climate was perceived as less stressful, the relationship between job satisfaction and intent to stay in the agency was stronger. Job satisfaction predicted intent to stay in the agency as a function of stress in this model. It is important to note the surprising finding depicted in Figure 1; even among those with relatively high job satisfaction the more the climate was perceived as stressful on the group level the less likely they were to predict they would remain in the agency.

Some of the analyses that included control variables resulted in informative results including the influence on individual level relationships by moderating variables. Selected results are summarized in general terms below.

Race: when employees of all races were compared there were no significant differences between them concerning retention. However, when black employees were compared to white

employees with all others omitted, black employees were less likely to remain in their current PCWS agencies.

Highest education: Those with high school educations were more likely to remain in their agencies and in the field of CWS than those with bachelor's degrees. Master's level employees were less likely to stay in their agencies or the field of CWS than those with bachelor's degrees. Some of the findings concerning highest education were moderated by stress in the organizational climate.

Social work degrees: employees with degrees in social work were less likely to remain in their PCWS agencies or the field of CWS than employees with degrees in other disciplines. Position titles: comparisons by position title revealed that social workers were less likely to intend to stay in the agency or the field in CWS than PCWS employees with other agency titles. Supervisors, on the other hand, were more likely to remain in both the agency and the field of CWS than employees with other agency titles.

Years in the agency: those who had worked in their agencies for 2-5 years were less likely to remain than those who had worked in their agencies for 6-10 years. However, those with 16-19 years of experience in their agencies were more likely, and those with 20 or more years of experience were much more likely to stay in their agencies than those with 6-10 years of agency employment. For the group with 2-3 years of agency employment, stressful organizational climates had a moderating effect on their intentions to stay in their agencies decreasing their willingness to stay in the context of higher stress.

Utility for Social Work Practice

An important finding in this study was that among most Public Child Welfare Services personnel in Central California, organizational climate is a significant factor affecting the relationships between job satisfaction and retention both in their employing agencies and the field of Child Welfare Services. Administrators and others who are interested in improving PCWS agencies through policy changes may concentrate on organizational climate as an intervention focal point. Stressful organizational climate was composed of aspects such as emotional exhaustion, role conflict and role overload. An effective way to address organizational climate may be to target these factors. For instance, if role conflict and role overload were targeted through policy changes such as the clarification and streamlining of roles they might decrease. Hopefully, this would alleviate the perceptions of agency climates as stressful and increase the retention of employees in PCWS organizations. Engagement among personnel may be enhanced by reducing depersonalizing aspects of the agency climate and increasing employees' perceptions of personal accomplishment by introducing structural changes such as genuine opportunities to engage in participatory decision making. Policies that aim at improving the PCWS work environment for those with advanced degrees and especially those with degrees

in social work might encourage more of them to stay. For instance, items such as higher pay, clearly articulated career ladders and professional development incentives may increase retention of those with degrees in social work.

Potential practice applications include group or team level interventions that address organizational climate. For instance, Glisson and colleagues have developed an intervention that targets the elements of organizational climate while focusing on service provision to PCWS clientele (Glisson & Schoenwald, 2005; Glisson, Dukes & Green, 2006). There is some evidence from the use of this type of intervention that improved organizational climate not only increases retention but improves the quality of service provision to PCWS children and families (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998, Glisson, et al., 2006).

Social work educators may use the findings of this study when it is appropriate for course content. For instance, many Master of Social Work programs include at least one administration course and some programs have concentrations in administration and/or policy. The findings of this study would be particularly applicable in those types of courses. However, any courses that include content on Child Welfare Services may utilize the findings of this study. PCWS agency administrators that are not currently in formal social work education programs may also find the study useful.

Finally there are many implications for future research but only a few will be mentioned. Exploration into the experiences of black social workers in PCWS agencies in Central California would be informative. Studies that explore the experiences of black social workers in other parts of the country to see if they are less likely to remain than those of other races would also be helpful. This is particularly salient since the administrations at many PCWS agencies intentionally attempt to recruit social workers from races that are disproportionately represented in the populations served by their agencies.

In addition, further research exploring the link between healthier organizational climates and the quality of services received by the clients of PCWS organizations would build on past results (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). National well-designed studies would be optimal in order to discover whether or not climate improvement positively affects service outcomes in PCWS agencies that function in many different environments.

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